

# Where Good Pedagogical Ideas Come From: The Story of an EAP Task

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*Teachers using a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach are always searching for learning tasks that have the potential to prepare learners for the real world. In this article, we describe how an authentic academic assignment for graduate students in a teaching English as a second language (TESL) course was transformed into a task-based lesson for undergraduate English for academic purposes (EAP) students. We provide a brief review of TBLT and how it fits in with the goals of EAP programming. We then describe the original academic task, followed by a detailed overview of the EAP lesson and reflections on its implementation.*

*Les enseignants qui utilisent une approche actionnelle (TBLT – task-based language teaching) sont constamment à la recherche de tâches d'apprentissage susceptibles de préparer leurs étudiants pour le vrai monde. Dans cet article, nous décrivons la transformation d'un travail académique authentique pour étudiants aux cycles supérieurs qui suivent un cours d'enseignement de l'ALS en une leçon actionnelle pour des étudiants d'anglais académique au premier cycle. Nous offrons un aperçu de l'approche actionnelle et de la mesure dans laquelle elle cadre avec les objectifs des programmes d'anglais académique. Par la suite, nous décrivons la tâche académique originale pour ensuite présenter une description détaillée de la leçon d'anglais académique ainsi que des réflexions sur sa mise en œuvre.*

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Where do good ideas for language learning tasks come from? Publishers offer a wide array of textbooks, and the Internet provides teachers with access to an almost infinite number of teaching ideas for such things as grammar, communicative activities, and games. For teachers using a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach, however, such freely available material may be less obviously useful for planning lessons that prepare their learners for real-world tasks. For these teachers, the search is always on for suitable, authentic tasks. To call a task in the language classroom “authentic,” we need to consider whether it corresponds to a real-world activity, or elicits communication similar to that which occurs during the performance of real-world tasks (Ellis, 2003). In this article, we describe how an academic assignment for graduate students in a teaching English as a second language (TESL) course

was transformed into a task-based lesson for English for academic purposes (EAP) students. We begin with a brief review of TBLT and how it fits in with the goals of EAP programming and then describe the original academic task, followed by a detailed overview of the EAP lesson and reflections on its implementation.

## **Part I: Task-Based Language Teaching and EAP**

While a consensus on the definition of a task has proved somewhat elusive, for the purposes of this article a task will be defined in terms of the following criteria (adapted from Van den Branden, 2006, p. 4): “A task is an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language.” Furthermore, according to Van den Branden, the students should be language users who are authentically using their L2 resources rather than language learners practicing a particular language form. A widely used approach to designing task-based lessons is to plan for three phases: pretask, task, and posttask (Willis, 1996). The pretask phase of a TBLT lesson prepares learners to perform the main task through such things as the exploration of topic-relevant content and language and above all to recruit learners’ interest in doing the task (Willis, 1996). The posttask can offer an opportunity to reflect on the task itself, pay attention to the forms that were challenging during the task, and even repeat the task in a modified way in order to improve accuracy and fluency (Ellis, 2006).

In EAP, language instruction should be driven by “the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts” (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 2). Thus, the EAP classroom has been described as “a natural fit for task based language teaching (TBLT) because it allows the students to use language and skills in situations they will face in their academic lives” (Douglas & Kim, 2014, p. 2). TBLT offers a student-centred approach to EAP instruction that, according to Van den Branden (2006), involves creating language learning opportunities that authentically reflect the types of tasks that language students can expect to encounter and be required to perform beyond the ESL classroom. These are important considerations for all English as a second language (ESL) learners but of critical importance in the high stakes world of the EAP student. Typically, these students have often spent long periods of time in ESL classrooms, and their entry to EAP at a Canadian university represents the last step on their path to becoming an undergraduate student. To prepare for full integration in the academic and social environment of the university in which EAP graduates will be called upon to carry out a wide range of communicative acts, students need to experience activities and assignments beyond the tried-and-true types of EAP tasks such as the academic essay and the academic presentation.

## **Part II: The Linguistic Landscape Assignment**

The context for the Linguistic Landscape Assignment was a graduate course on the topic of bilingualism at a Canadian university taught by the second author (hereafter, A2). Students registered in the course were either doing their master's degree in TESL or were second language teachers of other languages (Spanish, Chinese). The main topics of this course were the definition and measurement of bilingualism/multilingualism, a review of the literature on how one becomes bilingual, and discussion of some of the cognitive, linguistic, and social consequences of being bilingual. In addition, the instructor wanted to create an opportunity for students to explore the complex linguistic situation in Canada that includes the two official languages (English and French), many different ancestral languages of Aboriginal peoples, and the heritage languages of immigrants. Bilingualism is also involved when deaf individuals use both American Sign Language and written English. A2 wanted her students to explore this complexity by doing a hands-on assignment that focused attention on the local context.

The assignment that emerged was the result of two ideas coming together: the notion of the linguistic landscape from bilingualism research, on the one hand, and the idea of having students take photographs of their environment, on the other. The linguistic landscape is defined as “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25). Bilingualism researchers are interested in the linguistic landscape as a reflection of the ethnolinguistic vitality of a given language and the power relationships between language groups. The decision to have students work with visual images of the linguistic landscape was inspired by a project carried out at NorQuest College in Edmonton, Alberta. In this project, new immigrants to Canada used digital photography to represent Canada’s multicultural values (NorQuest College, 2012).

The assignment instructions asked students to take pictures of the use of languages other than English around the city. The only constraint was to have 10 images for a PowerPoint presentation on the last day of class. In doing the assignment, students adopted different strategies: one student focused on her own neighbourhood; others took pictures along a specific street; still others focused on particular ethnic groups. In addition to the oral presentation, students were to submit for assessment a written commentary for each picture that connected the image to the historical or linguistic background of the sign. For example, one student’s photo of a bilingual English-French sign was accompanied by a two-page description of official bilingualism in Canada.

The benefit of this assignment for this particular course was that students focused their attention on concrete manifestations of bilingualism rather than reviewing the technical literature on various topics concerning languages in contact. Many commented that they enjoyed doing this “fieldwork” and had

come to see their own neighbourhood more clearly through the process of deciding which signs to photograph and which to include in their presentation. Students' enjoyment of the project was evident through the enthusiastic buzz in the classroom on the day of presentations. These positive pedagogical outcomes led to A2's decision to submit a proposal for the upcoming provincial conference of Alberta Teachers of English as a Second Language (ATESL), which was to take place six months later. The instructor and several members of the class participated; A2 first provided an overview and then the students discussed a few of their slides and recounted their reflections on the process and outcomes of doing the assignment. It was the experience of being an audience member in that presentation that led the first author (hereafter A1) to take the idea of the linguistic landscape in a new direction.

### **Part III: The EAP Task-Based Lesson**

It was immediately evident to A1 that the linguistic landscape task could be adapted relatively easily for the EAP context as it automatically met the criteria for academic authenticity, having been used in a mainstream graduate course. The EAP class that was chosen was made up of 16 students from China, Brazil, Korea, and Japan. The class was evenly split in terms of gender. The language level of the class was expected to be at the B2 level in terms of the Common European Frame of Reference scale. These students were all bound for undergraduate study at the university across a wide range of faculties, including Arts, Science, Business, and Agriculture and Life Sciences. To make the linguistic landscape task suitable for this particular group of students, it needed to be adapted in a number of ways. First, the instructor decided to make a slight shift from the concept of the *linguistic* landscape from the scholarly bilingualism literature to the more widely accessible concept of *linguistic diversity*. Second, more detailed instructions had to be developed for the assignment in order to provide the EAP students with guidance about what was expected as an outcome. That is, they were told that they were to work in groups of two or three and make an 8-to-12-minute presentation of their reflections on linguistic diversity in the city, using photographic evidence to support their opinions. Third, a task-based lesson sequence was developed that included pretask preparation, extensive planning time with guided activities, and a posttask language focus.

#### *The Pretask Phase*

Many of the students in this EAP class came from largely monolingual contexts, so A1 began an extended pretask phase with the goal of activating learners' content schemata about the topic of linguistic diversity. This was done through four reading activities that introduced the topic of linguistic diversity, and then expanded the topic to include contemporary controversies

in this area. The readings began with a National Geographic map (National Geographic, 2014 using a relatively complex legend to show linguistic diversity around the world. Comprehension questions were directed at connecting this content to other curriculum goals such as “reading to interpret data and formatted information.” The remaining three online articles (Chappell, 2013; Grant, 2012; Huffington Post, 2013) dealt with issues related to Quebec’s public sign laws, which restricted information on signs to the use of French words only. The selection of these articles was intended to raise students’ awareness of the existence of linguistic diversity in Canada and to highlight the issues that can arise when languages are in contact. For each article, students wrote summaries, practicing skills outlined in the writing curriculum. After completing these three reading assignments, students were not only more aware of issues related to the topic (e.g., the challenges of regulating language in the public domain) but also more familiar with the vocabulary in the area (e.g., bilingual, official languages).

The second element in the pretask phase involved providing a model so that students could see what was meant by *reflection*. A1 invited one of the students from A2’s graduate class who had participated in the conference presentation to deliver a five-minute presentation about his linguistic landscape photographs. As part of this presentation, the graduate student emphasized his reflections as to why he had chosen particular photographs. This proved to be a pivotal pretask for the EAP students. From this concise, well-organized reflective presentation by someone who was himself an international student, the EAP learners came away with a full understanding of the task requirements.

### *The Task Phase*

The task phase included the planning and preparation for the presentation and the presentation itself. A1 felt that it was important to ensure that students had sufficient planning time for the presentation, including the collection of the photographic data and creation of the PowerPoint slides. All of the preparation was completed outside of class time. The students received detailed guidelines for collecting photographic evidence, for guiding their reflections, and for preparing their class presentations (see Appendix A). Finally, students were provided with a rating scale to inform them of the evaluation criteria. Students spent considerable time trekking around the city (coincidentally during the first real winter blizzard of the year) and rooting out public signs that demonstrated linguistic diversity. They completed the presentations during one afternoon of class. One student reported during the presentation that seeing a sign in Ukrainian made her research why Ukrainian signs would be in this Canadian city. She reported that she had discovered that the city’s diaspora of Ukrainians was large. Another student recounted that after seeing Spanish words on a cigar store, she went inside to

ask the owner about his motivation for using Spanish signs. The shop owner told her that he wanted his kids to understand that their heritage was Latino. These observations were very different from the students' previous participation in class, which could be characterized as producing more formulaic, unelaborated responses (e.g., "This task helped me to learn English and I enjoyed it"). There was little doubt in A1's mind that the authentic nature of this task had been an effective motivator. Thus, the EAP students came to understand that reflection meant something beyond description.

### *Posttask: Language Focus*

During the EAP students' presentations, it became apparent to the instructor that the passive voice would be a suitable focus for the posttask language focus. The function and use of the passive voice has been identified as one of the most important features of academic writing (Hinkel, 2004). All of the EAP students had received explicit teaching about the passive voice in their previous ESL classes and could explain how to form the passive and its prototypical use. And yet, during seven class presentations, the passive voice was not used even once, despite the fact that its use would have been helpful in this context. For example, it would have been natural to say *The sign was written in both Arabic and English* or *The services were explained in Ukrainian, French, and English* or *The menu is printed in English, Korean, and Japanese*. Instead, the learners produced correct active but less natural sentences such as *The shop owner made the sign in English and Spanish* or incorrect sentences such as *\*The sign [had] written in both Arabic and English* or *\*The services were being [explain] in Ukrainian, French, and English*.

After the task cycle was complete, A1 provided extensive explicit instruction on the passive voice and students were encouraged to consider whether the passive voice would be appropriate when they made e-postings as part of the follow-up task (see below). The assessment rating scale (see Appendix B) did not contain the use of the passive voice as a criterion for successful completion of the task. However, this task provided an authentic context for pushing learners toward use of the passive voice.

### *Follow-up Task*

As a follow-up task, students were encouraged to select the photograph that carried the most meaning for them. They posted it as part of a weekly online forum discussion and wrote one paragraph about why this photograph had significance for them. Writing assignments in formats other than long-form essays have been shown to be numerous and important in undergraduate programming (Hinkel, 2004; Leki, 2007). This weekly forum encouraged students to present more personalized opinions that were nonetheless supported with evidence from class readings. Students completed this task individually but also were required to respond to a posting from at least one classmate.

In this part of the task cycle, A1 observed that students used more accurate and more elaborate language for reflection and expression of their ideas. In particular, they displayed more appropriate/accurate use of the passive voice, as well as formulaic expressions to describe how the task had helped their learning.

## **Teacher Reflections**

A1 recognized that in the future, reflection would be more effective if introduced earlier in the term in a different, less complicated task. This would avoid information overload during the pretask, which she felt had been the case with this particular task cycle. The presentation/task report could have been greatly enhanced by including a more comprehensive peer feedback process. In addition to providing students with an activity to be undertaken during the presentations, this would have provided different feedback perspectives for each presenter. Finally, the incorporation of technology was an important element of this task. A1 perceived students to be extremely motivated by their ability to complete the assignment using their smartphones, and this has prompted her to consider how and when technology could be incorporated into other aspects of the curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have charted the evolution of a pedagogical idea from its inception in one context to its adaptation for L2 learners in another. In both contexts it was highly successful. One reason for the success of this assignment may well be that it allowed students to engage their critical thinking skills without the added time and effort required to write an academic paper in their L2. The focus on the visual modality meant students' creativity could play a role in addition to their analytical skills. The description of the EAP task cycle illustrates the process of task-based lesson design in which an academic assignment was modified and scaffolded to enable students to carry out the task so as to achieve expected content and language learning outcomes. From the implementation of the task, the instructor identified the need for a posttask language focus on the passive voice. All this could not have happened if A1 had not attended the conference presentation of A2 and her students. Clearly, one answer to the question of where good pedagogical ideas come from is by attending teacher conferences!

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## Appendix A

### Guidelines for Presentation: Exploring Linguistic Diversity in Your Community

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Your presentation should be eight minutes in length. Each speaker should speak for four minutes. You should work together to prepare the PowerPoint and you will be graded with one mark for this part of the presentation.

Describe your route and use an image of Google maps to show which route you took. Explain why you took this route.

Describe the signs you took pictures of. Why did you choose those signs? What is the function of each sign? To inform? To encourage? To preserve cultural heritage? To make money?

What is your overall impression of your community's linguistic diversity? Did anything surprise you? What did you learn about your community from this activity? How does the linguistic diversity compare with your home city/town? Should there be more signs in languages other than English? Should all signs be in the official language?

### Collecting Photographic Evidence

1. Choose an outdoor area of your community to explore. Make sure to record where you travel because you are going to need to show us in your presentation using Google maps.
2. Take as many pictures as you can using a smartphone or digital camera that explore your community's linguistic diversity. You will need to present 10 of the best examples in your presentation.
3. Your examples can be permanent signs, flyers, or any other printed text that is designed for public attention and in a language other than English.
4. Do not trespass on any private property. We are only interested in signs and notices in the public domain.

### Appendix B Rating Scale for Presentation

Exploring Linguistic Diversity in Your Community		Assessment scale				
<b>Specific Learning Outcome:</b> Deliver short academic presentations using some visual aids (e.g. PowerPoint, poster)		1. Very limited/Not enough to evaluate 2. Not there yet 3. Meets standard for EAP XXX 4. Exceeds standard				
Four minutes per speaker		1	2	3	4	Comments
Content	Meets the communicative goals of the task.  Includes appropriate reflection on questions related to linguistic diversity in your community					
Organization	Organizes information into an introduction, topic development, and conclusion, using a logical structure.  Supports main reflections with adequate and relevant information, examples, and reasons, presented in clear linear/logical patterns.  Acknowledges external written and visual sources with appropriate citation.  Makes good use of time and keeps within the time limit.					
Grammar	See select Grammar Assessment Items for EAP XXX					

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Vocabulary	Uses a wide range of vocabulary, and uses the New Academic Word List.  Uses language appropriate for the situation. Uses logical connectors.				
Pronunciation	Uses intelligible pronunciation, with very few problems for the listener. Speaks at an appropriate volume.				
Fluency	Uses normal speech with little hesitation.  Uses appropriate intonation and stress for emphasis.				
Presentation	Includes Google Maps visual of the route taken.  Includes ten photos of public signs demonstrating linguistic diversity.  Effective use of PowerPoint to organize visual material.				
	Employs effective communication strategies:  Uses appropriate eye contact Avoids reading Uses appropriate body language, including gestures and hand movements Responds to listeners' questions and comments in a meaningful way				